

Jack (Rick) Flowers  
 one of the guys mentioned  
 here went to Rose Poly in  
 the late 60's.  
 He has friends  
 around here.

Veterans (WV) - Vietnam War

Community Affairs File

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# ● VIETNAM

Sergeant Robert Batten was the most fearsome member of a little-known U.S. Army unit in Vietnam called the Tunnel Rats. The name was unglamorous and feral, but so, too, was the war in which Batten and the Rats were engaged. Their mission was to ferret out the Viet Cong in a terrifyingly effective and seemingly invincible network of subterranean redoubts that reached within 20 miles of Saigon.

In the process Sergeant Batten, or Batman as he was dubbed by his fellow Rats, became far more famous among the enemy, of whom he killed many, than among the American public. Communist prisoners spoke of Batman in awe during interrogation, and the sergeant was placed on the VC "10 most wanted" list, which included the most prominent U.S. generals and not one other noncommissioned officer.

But Batten's (and America's) war was, under the circumstances, unwinnable. From these tunnels, Communist cadres infiltrated the South Vietnamese capital almost at will, thus contributing to the demoralization of the

American war effort and leading inexorably to the fall of Saigon 10 years ago this month.

In 1969, toward the end of Batten's Vietnam tour, a green young lieutenant, Jack Flowers, took command of the sergeant and his Rats. The night Flowers arrived he received a briefing over dinner from a captain who was the battalion intelligence officer.

"You're only going to have one problem, Jack," Flowers was told, "and that's Batman."

"Batman? I thought he was the whole key to the Rats."

"He is," answered the captain, "but that's the whole problem. He knows it. If he weren't in the Army, he'd probably be in jail someplace. On the surface he's

*Mangold and Penycate, veteran British television journalists, were granted unprecedented access by Hanoi last year to visit the tunnel war zone and investigate the archives. They followed up with interviews of American survivors. This article is adapted from their book, The Tunnels of Cu Chi, to be published by Random House in June.*

THE HARROWING STORY  
 OF AMERICA'S 'TUNNEL RATS,'  
 UNHERALDED HEROES  
 OF A SAVAGE  
 SUBTERRANEAN WAR

# DOWN, DIRTY & DEADLY

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BY TOM MANGOLD AND  
 JOHN PENYCATE



The tactics of tunnel combat were primeval. Sneak around a corner, beam

like any other NCO, pretty good-natured, keeps his men in line, respects rank, all that kinda stuff. But he's mean inside. Nobody in his right mind should love being a Tunnel Rat, but he does. Your biggest job," the intelligence officer continued, "is going to be to learn everything he knows and yet still be in charge. There's a rule with Rats: There is no rank underground. Don't try to be a hero. They know what has to be done, and Batman's real proud of the fact that no Rat in his squad has ever been killed."

"How many have been wounded?" asked Flowers.

The captain laughed. "I think he's proud of that, too, Jack. Everybody's been wounded at least once."

In 1978 the North Vietnamese victors established a memorial to honor the generations who sometimes were born and, in great numbers, died in the tunnels. The museum and the hallowed ground around it, a veritable Gettysburg of Vietnam, lie in the Cu Chi district northwest of Ho Chi Minh City, the capital of the south. The heroes of the American side of this devastating underground war have been, until now, unheralded.

"No one," declared General William Westmoreland in his memoirs, "has ever demonstrated more ability to hide his installations than did the Viet Cong. They were human moles."

U.S. troops could invade, defoliate and destroy the land above, but they could not prevail as long as the Viet Cong occupied the earth below. The Americans had the greatest firepower of any army under the sun, but, in the stealth of night, the land seemed to belong again to the VC. Under the very feet of the U.S. military, the Communists maintained a 200-mile tunnel complex that at the height of the war in the mid-'60s stretched from the gates of Saigon all the way west to Cambodia. Just across that border lay the terminus of the critical North Vietnamese supply line to the south, the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

This sophisticated tunnel system bustled with ordnance factories, hospitals, flag-making workshops, printing plants, the-

aters for U.S.O.-type entertainment and, not least, command posts.

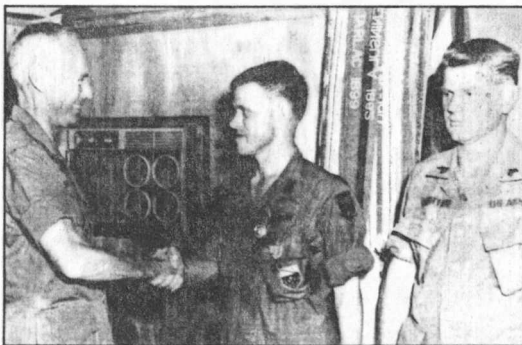
Amazingly, some of the underground structures were four stories deep. "This was like a thorn stabbing in the enemy's eye," says Mai Chi Tho, a Communist commissar who was based in the tunnels. "We were able to maintain our control of an area less than thirty minutes' drive from Saigon, the enemy's brain center." Adds U.S. Lieutenant General Richard Knowles, another officer who ought to know: "Without the tunnels, you wouldn't have had the Tet offensive."

It was that audacious 1968 onslaught, partially masterminded in Cu Chi, that helped undermine American support of the war and

hideouts in the accommodating dry laterite clay soil of the region.

These shelters were eventually linked into a network, almost all excavated by hand. Using ancient spades or hoes, the Vietnamese peasants labored underground, day and night, sometimes clearing out only a few feet in a long shift. Intricately engineered trapdoors camouflaged the entrances to secret passages, which zigzagged at angles of between 60° and 120°. Every hundred yards or so, special water traps were placed. These effectively sealed entire tunnel sections into separate compartments. As a result, when the Americans pumped tear gas or napalm into the labyrinth, the impact was limited to a single sector.

## Batman was proud that none of his men had been killed—and that all had been wounded



Major General Orwin Talbott awards the Bronze Star to Lieutenant Jack "Rat Six" Flowers and Sergeant Robert "Batman" Batten.

led to its end. In those same tunnels the final assault was begun on the capital, and there its key strategists celebrated news of the ultimate victory on April 30, 1975.

For the Communists, the American defeat was the culmination of a 30-year war. Indeed, ground was first broken for the tunnels back in the '40s and '50s when the Viet Minh, predecessors of the Viet Cong, were seeking to overthrow their French colonial masters. Time and time again French troops would sweep through the Cu Chi area rounding up Viet Minh leaders, often executing them publicly by guillotine. To help elude these roundups, the Viet Minh began to dig

adventurously built right on top of a thriving tunnel complex. For a long period, Viet Cong attacks on the 25th were mounted from inside its own base camp, jeopardizing a regular force of 4,500, plus visitors ranging from Secretary of Defense Robert MacNamara to Raquel Welch.

Farther to the north, America's famous 1st Division was also suffering casualties from tunnel-based guerrillas. So in early 1966 "The Big Red One" undertook to establish the first counterforce of specialists in subterranean warfare. This was the birth of the Tunnel Rats. In their four-year history no more than 100 elite GIs were qualified to wear the rare Tunnel Rat badge and distinctive jungle fighter's bush hat.

The men, all volunteers, were chosen for their small stature and supreme courage. They were armed only with flashlight, knife, grenades, a small handgun and animal cunning. (The idea of using sniffer dogs was quickly abandoned, because they fell easy prey to the booby traps that treacherously dotted the passages.) The Tunnel Rats were loners then (and aren't joiners today). They were highly independent yet, when their lives depended upon it, totally disciplined. They did not hang out at the enlisted men's clubs and tended not to patronize brothels or develop the drug problems that troubled so many other soldiers. They were, however, dangerous men to barroom loudmouths, to battalion bullies who might be tempted to take advantage of their size and, not least, to the enemy.

Authority and experience counted far more than rank among the Rats. Some officers never went into the tunnels at all, leaving the platoon sergeants to lead the men under fire. Whoever was in charge needed the full and unquestioning trust of his men; that trust was earned and had nothing to do with a rank on a sleeve.

The group was run, on the organization chart anyway, by a lieutenant. He was known as Rat Six—"Six" being the 1st Division's own code word for commander. Directly under him were one or two sergeants.

Sergeant Batten, a rugged, red-haired New Jerseyite in his mid-20s, joined the Rats in 1966. He eventually stayed in Vietnam for three years, or thrice the standard tour. While enlisted Rats were usually sent home after a maximum of 12 months, the officers

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rotated much more frequently; in fact, the average Rat Six lasted only four months. Enlisted Rats received an extra \$55 per month hazardous duty pay, officers, \$110.

Batten was prejudiced against blacks and would allow none to join the Tunnel Rats. But there were many Hispanics because of their small stature and litheness. Each team was eight or nine strong, with its own medic and radio operator, and the overall unit had two so-called Kit Carson scouts, Tiep and Hien. Both VC defectors, they knew their way through the enemy mazes but were never fully trusted. They were not, for example, allowed to go "point," that is, to be first man into a tunnel.

The Rat team stood by on 15-minute call at the 1st Division base at Lai Khe, ready to be helicoptered out to explore any suspicious subterranean activity in the field. The men were trained to rappel, or slide down, ropes from the choppers right into battle. At night they would return to Lai Khe.

The combat record of Batman was legendary. In one operation from August 9 to 11, 1968, the 11th Armored Cavalry sealed off three villages known to be under VC control. A Rat team was radioed for and arrived under the command of Sergeant Batten. The tunnels were stiff with VC. Five of them were flushed out the first day. Seven were discovered the following day, with three killed in a short, vicious underground firefight, before the rest surrendered. Under Batman's direction the squad then unearthed some secret compartments, and 15 more VC came out with their hands up.

The final day, the sergeant and his men probed deep into a tunnel leading from the village of Bau Dai. Contact was almost immediately established as the Rats crawled slowly through a 40-inch-wide passage. The point man risked death constantly as he led the team deeper into the unknown. If he used his special red flashlight too frequently, he would make a perfect target for any VC crouching in the lay-bys. It was slow and nerve-racking work. Throughout the morning there was a series of brutal encounters. Three Rats were wounded, but nevertheless 150

Viet Cong felt so hopelessly cornered that they surrendered. One by one they filed backward out of the tunnel entrances. Batten got his third Purple Heart for a wound he received in that action. He was hit while going point but continued forward until he collapsed.

Lieutenant Jack Flowers took over as Rat Six in February 1969. He was 25, short, tough and spiky, with an aggressive crew cut and a prominent lower jaw. A college dropout from Indiana, Flowers had spent a year in Europe with a Danish Communist girlfriend. Though antiwar, he became obsessed with guilt over others being killed on his behalf. Upon his return from Denmark he was drafted and sent to Officer Candi-



The tunnel troops' badge of courage bore the crude Latin motto *Non Gratum Anus Rodentum*, meaning "not worth a rat's ass."

date School. In Vietnam the new second lieutenant was assigned as a platoon leader of the 1st Engineer Battalion at Lai Khe.

One of Flowers's first tasks was cutting down trees and clearing landing zones. A few weeks into this work, he was humiliated to be labeled a "REMF" by a chopper pilot he'd kept waiting. "I've got to pick up some guys who've been fighting all day," sneered the pilot. REMF, as Flowers well knew, meant "Rear Echelon Mother F---." The epithet applied not only to Flowers but also, in fact, to the great majority of Americans who served in Vietnam. The logistics and support forces outnumbered the grunts who actually saw battle by seven to one.

Flowers began to feel a twinge about those who flew back to the base at dusk—dirty, bloodied and proud. One day he was talked to about volunteering to become Rat Six. Flowers recalled having seen

a dead GI pulled messily from a tunnel not too long before, but he thought, too, of the esprit of the Rats in their rakish bush hats. He accepted what he knew to be "the most dangerous job in the battalion" for an officer.

When he was introduced to the formidable Batman, the new Rat Six asked flat out why the sergeant had stayed in-country so long. "Because I love getting those gooks out of there," Batten replied. "They think they have it made down in those holes. Well, they've got it made like a rat's ass when Batman comes after 'em."

Flowers persisted. Weren't two years of war enough for anybody? "Not if it's the only one you've got," Batten stared purposefully

**'People have  
been known to  
be accidentally  
shot in the  
back,' the  
sergeant warned  
his new  
lieutenant**

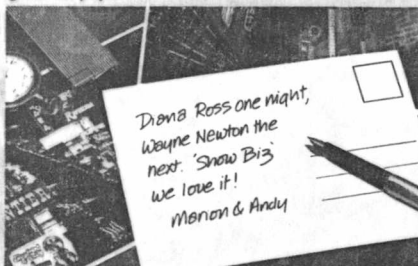
at the lieutenant for several seconds, then spoke again. "We'll get along just fine if you stay out of my way. If you don't, I might be dragging you out feet first. Strange things can happen down there. People have been known to be accidentally shot in the back."

This piece of coded insolence was not lost on Flowers. Overly Batten had been talking tactics; covertly he'd been referring to "fraggling," the murder or wounding of officers or NCOs by their own soldiers. The name came from the common method: rolling a fragmentation grenade into the victim's quarters. That happened when a leader was thought dangerously incompetent or obsessed with achieving promotion for himself at the expense of his men. Rat Six said nothing but held Batman's gaze.



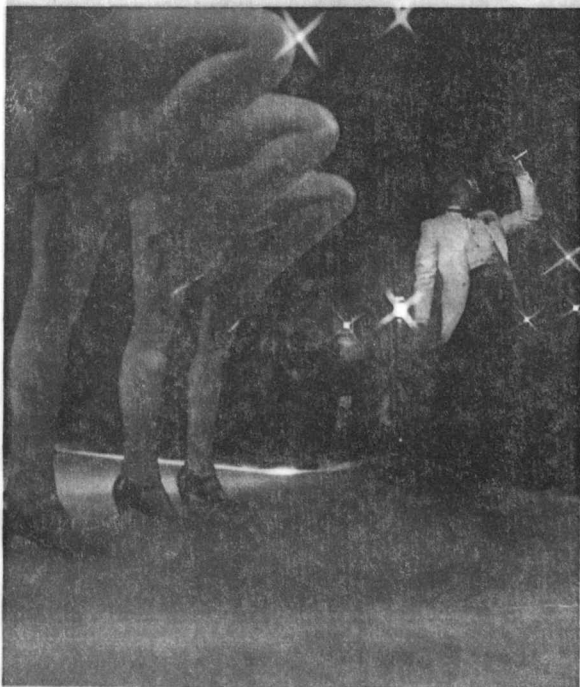
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## TUNNEL

## RA

The lieutenant realized he knew nothing about the tunnels and would be utterly reliant at first on Batten's experience. But unlike some of his predecessors, this Rat Six was determined eventually to lead the squad himself. He would not ask an enlisted man to do anything he would not do. There could be only one boss. Batten, Flowers decided, would be de facto leader of the Rats for another 30 days. But after that, the lieutenant would have learned enough to take charge.

So began the taut and menacing relationship between two men who had much ground to cover before there might be even the beginnings of mutual respect. At first, the two men were not only egos but also the safety of the Tunnel Rat team itself. Batten was contemptuous

what they were saying themselves: Here comes a new lieutenant who will not be underground.

The strong-willed young man began his training at base. (Among the enlistees who tried out at the official training school there, the majority flunked out or quit.) One skill learned was hand-to-hand combat while crawling through specially constructed culvert tunnels. (One of the most common confrontations to go for the eyes or the jugular. Batten had learned this part of Rat indoctrination.)

There were other rigid rules about operating in the tunnels. A Rat must never fire off more than three shots from his handgun.

## When a U.S. soldier emerges from a tunnel, he whistled 'Dixie' lest a buddy mistake him for a VC



A former paramilitary guard revisits a tunnel system at the DMZ. He named his son Dia Dao (tunnel), because that's where the boy was born.

of Flowers's college background and leadership pretensions. What he had seen of officers so far had left him unimpressed. The lieutenant, for his part, believed the sergeant to be a domineering, unreconstructed war lover. But he also recognized Batten as a hardened soldier whose record demanded admiration. Rat Six was further impressed when he met the rest of his squad. They wore clean, pressed uniforms and spit-shined boots. The men were all polite to Flowers, but he knew

the darkness: fire off six, and the enemy would know you were in the area. When a Rat was coming out of a tunnel, he whistled "Dixie" all the way; otherwise, U.S. surface troops tended to shoot first, assuming that mud-colored figures emerging from tunnels were hostile.

Soon the rookie Rat Six moved into the field on actual missions. Some tunnels were "cold" (no VC inside); some were hot, necessitating firefighting or setting demolitions charges to try to destroy the tunnel section and entomb the inhabitants.

On March 26, 1969, the squad was summoned to a tunnel complex near the Saigon River. A U.S. tank commander had seen some NVA (North Vietnamese Army) soldiers vanishing into the earth. He followed them and was immediately killed by a booby trap



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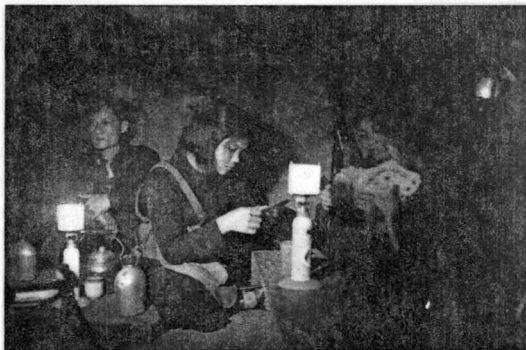
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## TUNNEL

## RATS



The VC supported a whole culture in the labyrinths, including a combat poet. Some of the most decorated fighters were women.

### Batten approached the trapdoor as if walking on scorpions—which was sometimes the case

When Flowers and the team arrived, Batten took one man with him into the tunnel. The lieutenant heard shots and a grenade explosion from inside. Minutes later the sergeant appeared at the bottom of the entrance shaft, grubby and sweating, to reveal that his companion had been wounded.

They dragged the man out, bleeding from shrapnel wounds in the arms and legs. (The Americans' concern for their dead and wounded puzzled the VC and presented them with frequent targets of opportunity.) Then Batten's head appeared. "The bastards have got us cold," he reported. "They're sitting on top of a trapdoor." Each different level of the tunnel was accessible only through a small, very narrow lid, expertly made from wood and dry clay. These were classic tunnel blind spots because one never knew what was on the other side, and there was no safe way to find out. Batten decided to go back after the NVA, but for the first time Flowers insisted on joining him. This was the moment Rat Six began to take over his own squad. Batman looked quizzically at him but said nothing.

Flowers crawled into the tunnel, letting Batten go point. As they reached the first sealed trapdoor, smoke and cordite fumes

still hung in the air from the NVA grenade. Batman cautiously pushed the trapdoor upward and quickly fired three shots into the blackness. Then he took his flashlight and poked his head through the hole. "Give me your pistol," he ordered Flowers, who did as he was told and started reloading Batten's own revolver. The enemy hiding in the tunnel had retreated. The sergeant pushed ahead and shortly came to another trapdoor, this time leading downward. Flowers followed the prescribed five yards behind—the distance beyond which a grenade explosion would not be lethal.

Batten approached the second trapdoor as if he were walking on scorpions (which was sometimes the case). He lifted the lid and started firing away. Suddenly an automatic weapon blasted out from underneath. The tunnel exploded with noise, and there was a storm of dirt. Batten fell backward, and Flowers assumed he'd been hit. The lieutenant crawled up and discovered his comrade was unhurt, although the dust had blinded him temporarily. Batten indicated the small 12-by-12-inch trapdoor opening. "Shoot in there," he said. Flowers fired the three shots and reloaded as Batman sat rubbing his eyes, talking to himself and pumping himself up for the continued pursuit. "Those bastards," he muttered. "Here they are, trying to kill me again." He started to move past Flowers.

"You've had your two trap-



One storied VC tunnel physician performed neurosurgery with an electric drill. Power was generated by pedaling a bicycle. More advanced medical equipment was acquired from Saigon's black market.

## 'If I had been John Wayne, I would have picked up the grenade and thrown it back at the bastards'

doors," said the lieutenant. (The rule among Tunnel Rats was that the point man would be changed every two trapdoors because of the overwhelming stress.) Batten eyed Flowers groggily, six inches from his face, then conceded. Rat Six edged past Batman and went toward the next trapdoor.

The lieutenant fired three more shots as he crawled down to the lower level, and three more from Batten's pistol as he approached a curve in the tunnel on his knees, flashlight in one hand, gun in the other. The sergeant came down behind him. The tunnel straightened out, then went another 10 yards and stopped at a wall. A little dirt fell from the ceiling at the end, revealing the existence of a rectangular trapdoor leading to the next level up. Flowers held his lamp steadily on the door.

The NVA soldier was evidently lying just over the trapdoor. Batten moved up beside Flowers and began to push up on it. But the lieutenant intervened. Flowers

was Rat Six and the point man; he would deal with the situation by himself. Batten crawled back a few yards. Flowers tensed in apprehension; sweat was running into his eyes. He edged up to the wall and hunkered under the trapdoor about 12 inches above his head. He placed a lamp between his legs, shining upward. Then he put his hand under the door and exerted a small amount of pressure. Batten cocked his pistol; Flowers gripped his. Flowers took a deep breath of the dank air and pushed up on the door. It yielded. He twisted it and set it down crosswise on its beveled frame. Then he paused, planning to slide it away and start firing into the void.

A foot above Flowers's glistening and grimy face, the trapdoor was quietly turned round and slotted back into its frame. Flowers froze; Charlie was right there. Suddenly the door moved again. Something dropped into Flowers's lap. He watched it fall, momentarily transfixed. Then the danger to his life overwhelmed him as he screamed, "Grenade!"

The M-26 grenade has a steel casing over a coil of pressed steel. It is designed so that the coil bursts into more than 700 pieces and the case into chunks of

shrapnel. The grenade is detonated by pulling the pin, which releases a lever igniting the fuse. That burns for five to seven seconds before setting off the pound of high explosive. It is fatal up to 16 feet.

In his nightmares ever after, Jack Flowers saw that grenade falling like a series of still frames in a slowed-up reel of film, dropping jerkily, hypnotically. Flowers did not know how far he had crawled when the explosion ripped through the tunnel. There was a tremendous ringing in his ears, and his legs were bleeding, but he was still crawling. Batten too was moving away when Flowers reached him. He shone his lamp on the lieutenant's torn and bloody fatigues. Flowers was preoccupied about having dropped his pistol. Batten said forget it and keep crawling. Another explosion rocked the tunnel. The NVA soldier was moving in for the kill.

Flowers blindly scrambled back toward the surface through the different levels. When at last he saw daylight and reached for the hands of the men above, he collapsed. When the lieutenant revived, medics were extracting shrapnel from his legs, and Colonel George Patton III, commanding the 11th Armored Cavalry, was standing over him.

The other exit to the tunnel was under one of Patton's tanks: the North Vietnamese had been trapped. Tiep, the former VC, tried to talk the NVA soldiers out, without success. Charges were set at each tunnel entrance, timed to go off simultaneously and cave in the whole structure. Batten, like Flowers, had a ruptured eardrum—from the earlier grenade explosion—and they were evacuated together. As a helicopter took them to the hospital, the tunnel collapsed; the enemy was smothered to death. Next day Colonel Patton—a true son of his famous World War II general father, "Old Blood and Guts"—ordered the corpses dug up for the body count.

As Flowers lay in the hospital bed, he mused to himself: "If it had been John Wayne, he would have picked up the grenade, lifted the trapdoor and thrown it back at the bastards. If it had been Audie Murphy, he would have thrown his body over the grenade to save Batman's life, and his mother would have received his posthumous Medal of Honor. But since it was Jack Flowers," he concluded, "I started crawling like hell."

In fact, both men received the Bronze Star from the division's commanding general. Rat Six had been blooded underground and at last felt the equal of Batman.

Batten accepted Flowers's new authority reluctantly but could not deny that Rat Six had earned the right to lead the squad. He had little affection for his officer, but camaraderie was not essential in the tunnels. One didn't have to be liked. One had to be good. Within a few weeks the team was operating in the notorious Iron Triangle—the area of South Vietnam where the VC had dug themselves into an unchallengeable complex of bunkers and tunnels. The Rats were helping train a platoon of ARVN (South Vietnamese Army) engineers in the science of tunnel exploration and demolition. The vaunted "Vietnamization" of the war had begun.

The ARVN employed TNT.

which was bulkier and less sophisticated than the C4 plastic explosive preferred by the GIs. On the second day out, an old but recently renovated tunnel was discovered, and Flowers decided it would be an ideal test for his South Vietnamese counterparts. The TNT charges were lowered into the access shaft to the tunnel and stacked at the opening. Conspicuous of the ARVN, Batten muttered: "These goddamn little monkeys will never make Tunnel Rats."

Flowers descended the entry shaft to supervise the demolition: there were notches in the sides for knees and elbows. Tiep, the Kit Carson scout, was supervising the ARVN soldiers carrying the TNT into the tunnel. Flowers looked up at the circle of sky. An ARVN soldier was looking down, holding a box of detonating caps that were needed to set off the charges. At that moment there was a horrifying explosion above-ground, and the next thing Flowers saw was a shower of thin silver cylinders falling on him. He covered his head. He was sitting on 50 pounds of TNT.

Detonating caps can easily explode, and countless soldiers over the years have lost fingers and eyes from their incaution. A cap will set off any other explosive material nearby, and so they are never carried in the same pack as explosives. When Flowers found himself atop a cache of TNT with a box of detonating caps spilled around him, he yelled for Batman. Then he ordered the terrified Tiep and the ARVN soldiers to retreat down the tunnel and send back one of his Rats, Denny Morton.

What had happened above-ground was that the Viet Cong had fired a rocket into an ARVN armored personnel carrier, and a fire had broken out. But Flowers dared not move. Morton appeared from the tunnel and, wide-eyed, gingerly began to pick up the detonating caps. Batten, meanwhile, had found the butterfingers ARVN soldier who had dropped them in panic when the attack began. They had been in a brand-new box of 50; seven were still in the box. That left 43. Morton was carefully collecting as



General Richard Knowles (left) inspects a typical entrance hole.

The sergeant on the field phone, James Lindsey, was killed in this very tunnel by a booby trap two days later.

## Batman's parting words to Rat Six: 'Either Charlie will get you or, worse, you'll get yourself'

many caps as he could see. Thirty-two. Flowers had still not moved. Then Morton shifted the sticks of TNT that were free of Flowers's weight. He found six more caps; that meant five were still unaccounted for. Batten looked down and decided to string a rope around Flowers and pull him up. In that manner Morton could remove the rest of the explosives.

A rope was lowered. Slowly Flowers was hoisted clear of the TNT. A cap fell from his lap, and Morton quickly snatched it up. As


Flowers reached a standing position, three more caps were revealed. That left just one. Batten continued hauling the lieutenant up to the surface. As he neared the top, Batten stopped: "Son of a bitch!" He reached down toward Flowers's head. The last of the detonating caps was lodged in his bush hat.

Some weeks later the Rats were exploring a tunnel system in the "Catcher's Mitt," a VC-controlled area shaped like a baseball glove east of Lai Khe. Morton, going point, reached a trapdoor leading upward, went through and then let out a piercing scream. Morton had joined the Army in Cleveland on his 18th birthday and was now just 19. He had volunteered for Vietnam: only five

feet five, slender and wiry, he was the ideal size for a Rat. He had already received a Bronze Star and a Purple Heart.

After the scream, Flowers heard three shots, followed by a call from Batten. When the lieutenant reached the trapdoor, the sergeant was standing in it. Morton was rolling on the tunnel floor, his hands covering his face. Blood was flowing through his fingers. "The SOB knifed him," said Batten. "I think he got it in the eye." The sergeant was firing away as Flowers began working Morton back down the tunnel. Morton moaned as they hauled him along, a few feet at a time. He was unconscious when they got him out. His face was covered in blood coagulated with dirt. There was a great gash starting at his hairline and running across the bridge of his nose, down through his left cheek. Flowers couldn't tell whether Morton still had his right eye when the helicopter ferried him away.

Sergeant Batten's DEROS—Date of Estimated Return from Overseas—was May 15, 1969. But he wanted to re-up again to fight the Viet Cong inside the tunnels he knew so well. This time he was not allowed to extend. It was decided—at Division level—to send him home. Batman had been wounded four times, and twice was the normal limit. A few days before the sergeant was due to leave, Flowers offered to buy him a drink. It was as close as the two men ever got, and on the third beer, Batten delivered his final verdict on Flowers. It was what the lieutenant had been afraid to hear. His attempt to emulate his sergeant's toughness and courage had not, after all, convinced Batten. The sergeant leaned back and made a scornful prediction. "You're not a killer, Six, and that's your problem. You're pretty good, the best Six I ever had, but you'll screw up somewhere. Charlie hasn't killed a Rat for quite a time. You'll either let him get you, or what's worse, you'll get yourself." The two men parted.

Word got back that Batten had quit the Army after his final request to stay in Nam was turned down. He returned to Runnemede, N.J., and wound up as a construction man for Mobil Oil. 

placement was Peter Schultz. He was a good sergeant and demolitions expert, but solidly built and over six feet tall—the wrong physique for a Rat. Now, without Batman, Flowers was exposed; the increased work and responsibility weighed upon him. He led mission after mission. But fatigue eventually began to drain him, and with it came fear. In one tunnel the enemy set off a large mine that completely buried Rat Six. It took Sergeant Schultz five minutes to dig him out, unconscious.

The end came in late July 1969. Flowers and the Rats were on a mission in the Iron Triangle where a VC base camp was discovered under construction, complete with woven baskets and long bamboo poles to hoist the dirt from the tunnels. The Rats explored a succession of holes that Viet Cong or NVA had hidden in. They proved cold. Finally only one hole remained. The Tunnel Rats were sure that at least one enemy was down there. Flowers realized that every other member of the squad had been down a tunnel that day except him.

Sergeant Schultz offered to take one of the Kit Carson scouts and explore the last hole. But Flowers felt that, as officer in charge, he had to take the most dangerous job himself. As usual, a grenade was dropped down the shaft first, but all the Rats were aware that it was little more than a noisy gesture of warning. The

Viet Cong had years of experience ducking around corners in tunnels to avoid the very limited range of a grenade.

The hole was about 15 feet deep and curved away to one side at the bottom. Flowers knew that it was not connected to any of the other holes, so if his theory was correct, the VC had to be there, waiting for him. The lieutenant sent for a "Swiss seat," a cradle of straps for easing him into the hole. The two strongest Rats would pay out the rope to lower Flowers to a point three feet from the bottom, then—at his signal—suddenly drop him to surprise the waiting enemy. It would take about 30 seconds to get down. Flowers assessed the situation coolly: This would be the one-on-one confrontation that he had long anticipated. His squad looked at him grimly. As Flowers went over the side of the hole, the two Kit Carson scouts were almost tearful, and the newer Tunnel Rats could barely watch. Schultz offered the lieutenant a second pistol. Flowers declined it but ordered that it be preloaded and ready to be dropped to him. If his men heard anything other than his pistol firing, they were to yank him up.

Flowers began his descent. Terror gripped him, the terror that possesses every young soldier who faces the reality that his life might be over in a few fleeting seconds. The image of Batman

kept reappearing to him, saying: "You'll screw up, you'll screw up." His feet and elbows rubbed against the sides of the shaft, dislodging clods of earth that would alert the Viet Cong below that he was coming. Flowers pictured Charlie on his knees, leaning against the side of the tunnel with his AK-47 set on full automatic fire. In an aperture about four feet in diameter, it would be damn near impossible to miss. Twenty rounds would cut through Flowers in four seconds.

The lieutenant knew that his one chance to survive was to kill the enemy with the first shot from his pistol. He would aim straight at his face; a shot to the body would not disable him enough to prevent his firing the AK-47. Flowers swung sideways, with his left arm over his chest and his right shoulder hunched to protect his temple, to minimize the wounds he was bound to take. He was three feet from the tunnel floor. The time had come. He signaled Schultz to release the rope.

Flowers hit the floor with his pistol firing; the first shot tore through the VC's forehead, the second his cheek, the third his throat, the fourth, fifth and sixth pounded into his body. With blood racing to his brain, Flowers kept pulling the trigger, clicking on the empty chambers of his revolver. Schultz heard the firing and instantly hurled the loaded pistol down to Rat Six. The gun clattered

down the shaft. Cordite smoke lingered in the dark tunnel air. As it cleared slowly, Flowers stared dumbly in front of him—confronting the apparition his mind had created. There was, in fact, no enemy soldier, no adversary with an AK-47, just a blank wall with six holes neatly grouped in the dirt. Six shots. And the time-tested law of the Tunnel Rats decreed no more than three. Sergeant Schultz and the others peered down at their leader. Rat Six had faced his moment of truth. Somewhere inside Flowers's head, Batman laughed.

Nothing was said after his men pulled the lieutenant out and learned that no enemy had been in the hole—yet everyone knew what would happen. Flowers's own rules would have to be applied to him as strictly as to any other Tunnel Rat. Sergeant Schultz went to the battalion executive officer and told him about the incident. The men's confidence in their leader was shaken: in the future he might be a danger to them. Two days later at Lai Khe, the executive officer relieved Flowers of his Tunnel Rat command and told him to go home. "Don't make me tell you what you already know," the officer said. "You're finished. You've fought your war. Stay out of sight for three weeks, then forget all about Vietnam and the Tunnel Rats."

When the Rats were dispatched on their next mission, Flowers was not told about it till they had gone. For the sake of their morale, he was quickly shipped out of Lai Khe to Di An, where he stayed drunk for a week; then to Bien Hoa and home. He had just vanished; there were no farewells, no change-of-command ceremonies, no nothing.

Today, 10 years after the fall of Saigon, Jack Flowers sits in the penthouse restaurant of the Philadelphia skyscraper where he works as a stockbroker and ruminates about the end of his war. "Rat Six was dead," he says. "He died in some tunnel in the Iron Triangle. Batman was right. Charlie didn't get me; I got myself." ♦

Jack Flowers (left) and Robert Batten met warily this winter for a reunion in Runnemede, N.J. Flowers, who is writing a thinly fictionalized novel based on his heroics as Rat Six, admits he is 30 pounds over his fighting weight and doubts that he could now fit into a tunnel.



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